

## **What is a Chapter?**

*by Subhuti*

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So I am following the suggestion of Kovida's. There are two sort of geneses of tonight's talk, which is more like notes towards a talk rather than a talk itself. First of all we have been dealing with some quite difficult things amongst you and it seemed to be important to put that into context. And secondly, you particularly ... were saying you weren't sure what a Chapter was for in a way. And so I thought that by addressing that to some extent I could make a useful contribution to the meeting. So this might be called 'what is a Chapter' or 'the Chapter as a Context', perhaps that would be even better as a preliminary working title.

We know from Bhante's founding document, or rather Cittapala's notes on Bhante's founding statement on the Chapter system, that he sees the Chapter as the smallest unit of the Order and the formation of a Chapter should have a tonic effect on the whole Order. So he sees that the Chapters as operating in relation to the Order as a whole, that if the Chapter is alive and effective then the whole Order will be alive and effective.

But it is quite important to ... relationship between the individual Chapter and the Order as a whole whereby if those Chapters are working well then the Order as a whole is working well. Perhaps that is not the only factor but it is no doubt a very significant one.

But I think it is perhaps even more important to think of the Order Chapter as the focus for the individual Order member's spiritual life. So, if you like, the Chapter is both the smallest unit of the Order and what stimulates and makes the whole Order effective. But it is also the context within which the individual Order member lives his spiritual life. Or it is the focus, perhaps that is the best way of putting it, for the individual Order member's spiritual life. This is at least the theory and when it works well it is the practice. I say for instance that is largely one's experience here. So insofar as the individual Chapter stands between the Order as a whole and the individual Order member it is in a way you could almost say the basis for the Order and it is for that reason that Bhante says an Order member without a Chapter is a contradiction in terms. Because if you have got no Chapter you haven't got a context within which to experience yourself as an Order member and if you are not participating in an Order Chapter you are not contributing to the life and health of the Order as whole in that fundamental way. Of course, there are other ways you can do that but the Chapter is essential to it.

If we didn't have Order Chapters, if you imagine it, what would we have? We would have a lot of individuals who might be make quite a lot of spiritual effort and so forth, perhaps meeting in large gatherings or in ad hoc gatherings but there would be very little ... to keep the whole Order in being, you could almost say. You would have to try to keep the Order in being by having Conventions and so on and so forth. But because there is nothing intermediate between the individual Order member and the Convention, the Convention itself would have a quite different character, it would have to carry a lot of weight that the fact you have got Chapters means it doesn't have to carry. One could develop that thought further but it is at least worth contemplating what the Order would be like if you didn't

have Chapters. Even if Chapters are not always that effective they do play a very important part in the spiritual economy of the Order. Yes, as I say, I think one could develop that thought much further but I just throw that out as a clue to the importance of the Order. Imagine the Order without Chapters - what would we have, how would it work? And I think there would be little doubt that it would not be nearly as effective as it actually is.

So we have got the Order Chapters standing intermediate between the individual Order member and the Order as a whole. Because you have got individual Chapters in a way you can have an Order as a whole, because each Order member belongs to a unit which is more than himself, which is a microcosm of the Order. I think Bhante even used that term, a microcosm in the hermetic sense, because you belong to the smaller you belong to the larger. Because you are interacting with other Order members within a Chapter you have got a model and a basis for your interaction with Order members within the macrocosm, within the Order as a whole. The Order as a whole doesn't exist you could almost say, it is almost in practical terms you never experience the Order as a whole. It must be many years since we have had every single Order member present in the same room at the same time. So you can never sit down in a room and experience every other Order member at the same time. Of course you can in various situations and circumstances come across other Order members but if you have got a Chapter you have got a lens almost through which you can see the Order as a whole. It focuses the Order as a whole to the individual Order members.

But you can look at it from the other point of view that the individual Order member needs an immediate context within which to focus his or her spiritual life. And that is the function of the Chapter. This I hope will emerge much more because this is going to be the main thread in some ways of my discussion.

So, looking at things from the point of the view of the individual as part of the Chapter, the Chapter being the focus for the individual Order member's spiritual life. Clearly that arises from the nature of spiritual commitment, because one is committed to the Three Jewels. That is why we come together, we come together as individuals who Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels. That is what forms the Order. So it is the continual act of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels that keeps the Order in being. And the way I want to explore this is by looking at the verses of acceptance at the end of the ordination ceremony. Partly because they do form a very neat ... , and partly because they are somewhat neglected. I know that Vishvapani recently talked about them at Padmaloka. And Bhante doing the ordination in the woods recently said that he had realised just how important those verses were and especially the last one - *for the benefit of all beings I accept this ordination* - and felt that we needed to draw those out much more because they do make much more explicit the contextual nature of ordination, and especially the Bodhisattva dimension. In accepting ordination you are accepting in the spirit of the Bodhisattva Ideal.

So I want to use that to look at how the Order works both as a focus for the individual Order member's spiritual life and to some extent secondarily as the basis for the realisation of the Order as a whole. So both dimensions, from the Chapter down to the individual, and from the Chapter up to the Order as a whole, I think are revealed by examining each of these four verses of acceptance.

I am going to take them in an order which suits my exposition rather than the order in which they are usually taken, which varies.

### **For the Sake of Enlightenment**

So I am going to start off with the verse - *for the sake of enlightenment I accept this ordination*. And I take this first because in a way it is most fundamental insofar as what unites us is our Going for Refuge to the Buddha with his Dharma and his Sangha. And you Go for Refuge to the Buddha because he is the enlightened individual and we see enlightenment as the goal of our lives and as the source of all value. Everything achieves its place, its due proportion, because of enlightenment. This incidentally is something I think is quite important that for the Buddhist the Buddha or enlightenment is the pinnacle of value and everything else is valued in relation to that in all dimensions, whether aesthetic, moral, or in terms of cognition or whatever. So in Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels we put the Buddha at the centre of our lives, we see the Buddha as the source of all value, and we dedicate our lives to trying to become more and more like the Buddha. In other words Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels.

So as Order members, as those who are committed to the Three Jewels, who accept their ordination for the sake of enlightenment, we are trying to apply the principles of the Dharma at every moment of our lives, in every aspect of our lives, and in all the detail of our lives. If we are to Go for Refuge effectively there is no area of our lives that should not be permeated by the spirit of Going for Refuge. Meaning that quite literally. To take the most ridiculous, we should go to the toilet mindfully enough for that to be an aspect of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. We are never on holiday if we are effectively Going for Refuge. And that is a very tall order, and of course there is a very big difference between our aspiration to do that and our ability to do it. And I think probably every one of us would have to admit that we fall far short even of the sort of standard descriptions of effective Going for Refuge. Of course we are effectively Going for Refuge otherwise we wouldn't be Order members, however, when we look at it we have to recognise that there is quite long periods of holiday during the course of any given day when the Three Jewels are not uppermost in our lives, we are not really applying ourselves, we are not doing things that actually bring us nearer to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. And a lot of our struggle is to be much more effective in that sense, so that the Three Jewels permeate every moment of our lives, in every situation of our lives we are not on holiday.

This does not mean that you are only Going for Refuge when you are at your Centre or doing a formally Buddhist activity. That is quite important. A few of you are involved in formal Buddhist activities in the sense of going to classes and so forth but quite a lot of you spend quite a lot of your life outside the formal activities of the Movement, if you see what I mean. But that does not mean that you are any the less effectively Going for Refuge or that those activities are in principle excluded from Going for Refuge. In some ways you have got to make more effort because there is less of a direct reminder. With a family you can be Going for Refuge. I think this is quite important. This is why we have been recently

looking at the whole issue of a Buddhist marriage ceremony because want to make it clear that an Order member who is married, especially to another Order member, is not that the marriage is an unfortunate accident as it were which you have to try and work round when you get on with your spiritual life, you have actually got to make that an aspect of your spiritual life, which of course can be very hard indeed. But so many other things that we do can also seem as if they are not part of spiritual life. And we need to be actively moving to make ourselves more aware so that every single second of of our lives we are making the efforts that are necessary to move from effective to real Going for Refuge.

Well, even saying all this is quite challenging isn't it, and I think we would only be honest if we were admitting that it wasn't the way we lived. So how do you do it? And of course it rests fundamentally upon your own efforts. However, I think again, if we are honest we know that a lot of the time we just don't have the strength to make those efforts in every single area of life. Alone we just don't have it. We are of course advised to put ourselves into conditions which support our efforts, that is what the institutions of the Movement are supposed to do. Quite often they do do that, sometimes of course they don't at all ... but that is what they are for and if you can, well, you are advised to take advantage of those, if you want to ... advantage of those. But if you can't, or don't want to, then you need to find other ways of bringing greater consciousness to bear on the spiritual effort. And it does seem to me that this is the critical issue for the great majority of us - how to get spiritual life to invade those habitual or even hidden portions of our lives that, as it were, don't come up for discussion, don't come up for scrutiny, and so on.

It is very much of a topic I went into last night but I want to touch on it again from this new point of view. How do we get spiritual life to really bite deeply into us? Because if we are to gain Stream Entry, which is where we should be aiming, or are to become real Bodhisattvas in the sense of the *bodhicitta* arising decisively within us, we have got to become much more permeated by the Three Jewels. And to do that we often need to borrow strength from circumstances and situations because we ourselves at this stage just don't have enough. And I don't think that is something to be ashamed of, you could almost be proud of yourself for admitting it and being honest about it.

So it seems to me that the Chapter should be the circumstance in which all this comes up for scrutiny. It is the situation in which you come together as nothing but Order members, you are not a Chairman, you are not a husband, you are not an artist, you are not earning your living, you are just an Order member. Of course those things are also aspects of you but, you probably see my point, when you come together you don't come together in those activities or form those identifications or whatever, you come together simply because you are Order members who are dedicated to the Three Jewels. And so the fact that you have an Order meeting in which you meet simply as Order members should have the effect upon you of throwing you back on that fundamental act of commitment and challenging you to see the extent to which your Going for Refuge is permeating your life, the extent to which the Three Jewels are effective every moment of your life. I think ideally that is what it is, as a focus for your spiritual life. You come together, you sit down, and there you are just a naked Order member so to speak, you take off all your hats, all your status, all your identifications, all your interests, you might say even apart from being an Order member,

and ... the first effect is that you begin to reflect back on the extent to which you really are living up to your commitments as an Order member.

The second effect is because you do come naked to the Order meeting as an Order member and everybody else comes in that way, the only thing that you have in common from the point of view of the meeting is accentuated. ... as we all came into the room wearing red, the fact that we were all wearing red would somehow become much more sort of present and conscious to us. If we all came in different colours you don't sort of notice so much. Because if we all came in wearing red we would very much be aware that we were all wearing red. If we all came into the room Going for Refuge so in some kind of almost mysterious or intuitive way that Going for Refuge should be accentuated within us. And I think that when Chapters are successful it is accentuated within us. I think what happens when it is not entirely successful is that there is a sort of frustrated experience of that, you have got to know what you want, or know what you should be having, you have a sense that it has not happened. It may even be that it kind of has happened under the surface but you have got caught out by the difficulties and so on.

So, when we meet as Order members who have accepted our ordination for the sake of enlightenment this is I think what it essentially means, that you are immediately thrown back on the extent to which you are fulfilling your commitment to the Three Jewels and at the same time that commitment itself is reinforced or accentuated by mutual resonance with the Going for Refuge of the others within the Chapter. In some ways you could say this is the most important thing, everything else unfolds from that. All the other things follow on from it even, you might say, naturally. And so it is quite important to get this really clear and to make sure one really fully understands this idea of coming naked, leaving everything else behind, just thinking, 'Well, here we are, Order members, here I am an Order member. That is, somebody who has committed himself to the Three Jewels. Am I doing this as much as I possibly can?'

And of course once you are thrown back on that, you become aware of shortcomings, that is where confession becomes natural. You also become aware of your small triumphs and victories, and that is where sharing your own spiritual experience comes into play. It is where acknowledging your weaknesses, acknowledging your perhaps inability to make Going for Refuge penetrate every area of your life, you are asking for help, you are opening yourself up to the scrutiny of others, comes in. So that you are inviting others to help you to Go for Refuge in all areas of your life, even those areas which they know nothing about.

So for instance, Dharmamudra going to jails or whatever, it is not so much a question of sharing what happened but of looking at what happened in the light of spiritual aspiration and either sharing insights and so forth that arise from that or getting help in sharpening and crystallising one's attempt to do so in those situations. And similarly for others. If it is in your artistic work you sometimes lose the connection, you can ask for help and guidance in that way. And so on, just in the ordinary details of life you ask for help and guidance in that sort of way. That help and guidance may simply be in having the space to explore. Sometimes I think we are a bit too ready to make suggestions and really what somebody

needs is just some helpful questioning rather than direct advice. We seldom really know enough about other people to be able to ... advice, although we sometimes do. And particularly with at least three different types in one Chapter you need to be careful not to assume you know how somebody else's mind works. But by asking questions you can help them to understand themselves better and help them to come to a clearer realisation of what they are working on.

And I think this is perhaps the crucial part of this consideration. I have come to think that many Order members I meet are not sufficiently clear what they are working on in their spiritual lives. So that their spiritual lives are quite unfocused, they do their meditation, they do their classes, and get on with their lives, and I am sure they try to apply moral principles and so forth, but my own experience again is that unless you are quite directed and quite focused it is very difficult to really bring about deeper changes within yourself. And I think that we all of us need to have a sharper and clearer image of what the spiritual issue is for us. Of course it is never quite that simple. One spiritual issue is a bundle of spiritual issues, but nonetheless one should be able to focus. And focus is a good term. It is a bit like trying to light a fire with the sun's rays. The magnifying glass, if you hold it at the right distance will provide a burning point which will set the flames alight. But if you don't focus, if you don't get the right distance, well, you don't get enough heat, you don't generate enough intensity for fire to start. And I think one of the things that should be coming about through one's being in the Chapter in the way that I have suggested is that your spiritual life come into focus and you become much clearer about what you are doing.

I have been thinking about this a lot in respect of my own life. We very easily, with the kind of responsibilities that I have got, but I think this is a fairly general point, you can find your life consists of bits and pieces. You do a bit of this, and you do a bit of that, and you can have the feeling that it doesn't all add up to something. And I think that is because one hasn't sufficiently deeply identified what the working edge is for you, so that you haven't identified what it is that you need to be keeping hold of as a constant thread of endeavour through all the varied activities of your day, if you see what I mean. It is not always easy to put into words what that may be, sometimes you know what you are working on but you couldn't exactly put it into words or when you put it into words you might even feel that you are falsifying or denying it. Often it is actually quite straightforward. For instance, you just need to not be so distracted, so you need to be putting an effort all the time into trying to focus your energies much more. Or you need to be more emotionally positive, so you need to be sort of constantly trying to work on bringing more *metta* into your daily activity. Or you need to be just more clearly aware of your mental states, so you don't get carried away by the activities that you are involved in. That sort of thing may be what you need to be working on. Maybe more fundamental than that you need to be getting more sharply aware of impermanence or the sort of positive counterpart, or *sunyata*. Or you might need to be more aware of *dukkha* and its positive counterpart of directionlessness, and so on. So you may need to be sort of working much more in that much deeper level.

I think that is probably something that most of us could bring more into our lives, a stronger sense of a constant relationship with the Dharma in its most transcendent sense, so that all the time we are somewhat in relation to that, we are never too far from it. But my

sense is that most of us are not sufficiently focused in this way. We are very good people, we are really trying to be moral, we are trying to do good, we are trying to improve ourselves, but it is a bit haphazard, a bit hit and miss, and if we are in good circumstances that can carry us along, if we are not and we don't have enough strength we may find ourselves feeling quite frustrated, even down hearted because we are not sort of really pushing ahead.

So I think the Chapter should help us to focus our spiritual lives. It should be a focus for our spiritual lives so that it is as if the Chapter as a whole should be the magnifying glass which focuses down the rays of Dharma upon our hearts so that they catch fire, to extend the metaphor. It should be a kind of intensifier. And of course what I was talking about last night is one particular important aspect of this where you make your Chapter into an arena for *apatrapya*.

Of course it can work as an intensifier in a slightly different way. I think I would say this is happening a bit to you lot. Or maybe particularly the sort of thing that you did this morning where you are actually giving you reflections on each other and your interaction with each other, I think this is an extraordinary opportunity to grow through that sort of interaction. And I speak from very direct personal experience. You know that Bhante lured us all to Madhyamaloka and then locked the door and threw away the key. And he said to me recently that he thought that was one of the most clever things that he had done. Because he thought that essentially we were a bunch of individualists, and very good individualists and all the rest of it, but we had all of us been in leading positions from very early on in our Order careers and had done very well in most ways but corners and areas of life had not been really subject to scrutiny because we were too agile for other people to catch us. So we were all put into a room, a locked room, a dark room, together and what happened? That was before I came along, I fortunately missed the worst of it, but we clashed and clashed quite ugly some times. It was quite unpleasant I am told. Because these unregenerate bits, the parts that spiritual life up until that point had not reached, came up against each other and we were all leading Order members and none of us were going to give way to anybody else. So all of this began to get sort of rubbed off, came up to the surface and got worked on. But it was quite a painful experience. As I said, I was fortunate in having missed the worst of it when the building hadn't been completed and nothing had been very worked out. And I am told by somebody who was there at that time that it was very difficult indeed, a lot of clashing and fighting and arguing and so on. But through that people have come to a greater understanding of themselves and I think that everybody who went through that process has come out of it a more rounded and better individual, better able to communicate, and more deeply Going for Refuge.

So my feeling is that you have got a process to go through and that it is actually a very valuable one even though it is rather unpleasant and painful and I frankly think that pretty well every one of you have quite a lot of work to do to make the Chapter work and I think I could sort of give you each a bit of advice and the things that you could work on and I am sure that you could give each other bits of advice. It is quite simple in a way looking at it. You have all of you got to change in order for this to be a better Chapter. And that is why it great to be in a Chapter. Perhaps it is rather unfortunate that it has not sort of naturally

worked in that way but I think that we have brought things a little bit to a head and now you can get on with the business of trying to learn from the clashes that have come up between you because of your different characters and your unskilfulnesses to different degrees and in different ways. And this to my mind part of what a Chapter is. It brings us into a vivid enough contact with each other for us to be forced to look at ourselves. Because you can't change other people, you can only change yourself. So if everybody sort of tried to think, 'Well, what can I do that will make this go better?', listening to what other people saying about them, well, then you would not only do better as a Chapter, but I think that your own spiritual life would be galvanised in many ways.

So I think it is quite important not to think of difficulties in this way as meaning that you can't get anywhere, you have to give up, and so on. But in a way you have come up against something that if you can accept it wholeheartedly enough it could be a real spur to your spiritual lives. I know it is very nice for us to sit on the edges and tell you that but believe me we have been through something far more difficult than that because at least you all like each other. There were periods when that wasn't the case at Madhyamaloka.

So, yes, you can use this intensification of coming together in a Chapter where you have such high expectations, such a noble and exalted sort of ideal for what a Chapter should be, then your experience of it not being like that. So you have to try to examine what is it that stops it from being like that and you offer your own comments as regards other people. But the one you can do something about is yourself. And if you take very seriously the positive value of that sort of coming together, even that difficult coming together, you can get a very great deal from it.

So, I think that in summing up, that the Chapter helps us to continue to accept our ordination for the sake of enlightenment by bringing this much more vividly up against our Going for Refuge and helping us to look at whether that is permeating the rest of our lives, giving us an opportunity to explore how we make that happen, giving us the support for it to happen, and revealing us much more strongly because we are brought into this vivid contact with each other on the basis of our Going for Refuge. So, even if it is sometimes rather painful I think this is the importance of the Chapter as a medium for the sake of enlightenment. And of course, once one has learnt how to work with that it becomes less painful and much more of a joy, or the pain is one has willingly undertaken from your own point of view, the pains of shame, rather than the pains of frustration. And I think perhaps the business end of it is that every one of you should know what you are working on for the sake of enlightenment. And the Chapter should help you to know what you are working on for the sake of enlightenment. And the Chapter should be the situation, or at least one of the situations, and certainly a very important situation, in which that is discussed, spiritualised, looked at, intensified.

### **With Loyalty to Our Teachers**

So secondly - I am dealing with this a little bit more briefly because I think in a way what I have just dealt with is the most important element of it - *we accept this ordination with*



*loyalty to our teachers*. Of course the loyalty to our teachers is an expression of the principle of *kalyana mitrata*, where we are looking to others who have a greater degree of experience than we do, at least in certain respects. And beyond that even to the principle of the beautiful itself, the *kalyana* itself, which they embody to a greater degree than you do. So when we accept the ordination with loyalty to our teachers we are accepting the principle of *kalyana mitrata*, the principle that there is a higher factor to which we are opening ourselves. It is going to be embodied certainly in our teacher in the sense of Bhante, it is going to be embodied in Order members who are very definitely more experienced than we are. But it is also going to be embodied to some extent in every other Order member, an Order member insofar as they Go for Refuge is in contact with that higher spiritual dimension to some extent. And they are bound to be in contact with it in different ways, to different degrees, at different times, than you. So I think it would be extremely rare for one to be in a Chapter where at some time or other, in some way or another, every other Order member in the Chapter could not be a *kalyana mitra* to you. I think that, if you think about it, everybody here for instance can be for you at some time, in some particular area, an inspiration to you, somebody who uplifts you. And so the Chapter then becomes the arena within which you exercise that principle of *kalyana mitrata* by being receptive to the other members of the Chapter as embodying in some ways, at some times, to some degree, the principle of *kalyana mitrata*. Of course, even people on the same level as you, you can never compare things quite in that literal minded way, can be *kalyana mitras* to you, because they do embody the *kalyana* even if it is not to the same degree. But then when you meet each other on the basis of *kalyana*, the *kalyana* is intensified and developed. So you meet in the context of a higher principle.

That is the point. In the *vinaya* it says that the principle kind of Order meeting is what is known as *sammukha*(?), that means face to face, and it is said to be face to face not just with each other but face to face with the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, or being in the presence of. *sammukha* is sometimes translated as in the presence of. So it not just in the presence of each other, but in the presence of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. So you meet in the presence of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. And the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are a principle which you will always be looking to as lying behind what you are doing together, your communication with each other. You are constantly sort of trying to be receptive to that principle as it is embodied within everybody present. And it must be embodied within everybody present because everybody is Going for Refuge, or to the extent that they are Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. So the Chapter becomes the medium for the experience of *kalyana mitrata*, at least in the sense of being roughly on the same level but sharing that to greater degrees and at different times and so on. Of course it may be that you have got those different levels of experience within the Chapter in which case *kalyana mitrata* is going to be experienced in a more sort of standard sense.

But I think that, more than that, the Chapter generally encourages this principle of receptivity to the higher dimension which is especially embodied in those who are more developed than we are, but it is the principle itself that we are looking to. And it is through our openness to that principle within the Chapter that we are able to be open to the likes of Bhante, senior Order members, our Preceptors, our *kalyana mitras*, who are outside the Chapter, if you see what I mean. If you are not receptive to the principle of *kalyana mitrata*

within the Chapter it is difficult to be receptive to it outside it. So in that way I think the Chapter is a very important focus for the principle of *kalyana mitrata*. And of course it can be in a quite practical sense that the Chapter is asked from time to time to discuss the important issues within the Order by those who have been entrusted with, for lack of a better term, the leadership of the Order, the weighty or central responsibilities within the Order. So there too one is exercising that principle of *kalyana mitrata* within the Chapter. As I said, I am going to go rather briefly over these final points.

### **In Harmony with Friends and Brethren**

So, then the Chapter is the focus for us accepting our ordination *in harmony with friends and brethren*. And this is pretty obvious and fundamental. Harmony is the essence of spiritual community and it is the essence of the spiritual life because you are living the spiritual life in order to overcome your self obsession, your self cherishing, your selfishness. That is the whole purpose of spiritual life, it is to overcome the subject/object dichotomy, to eliminate the *atma-klesas*, the *klesas* that are to do with your self attachment, and it is to achieve the state of selflessness, of *anatta*, of nonduality which is compassion, which is *maitri*, and so on and so forth. That is what spiritual life is about. So harmony between those who are spiritually committed is a goal which you pursue together. You try to transcend yourselves together. So in your Chapter, the whole endeavour of your Chapter is self transcendence. That is what you are trying to do by coming together in this way, you are trying to go beyond yourself so that you achieve you could even put it in terms of *ekacitta*, you are trying to become many bodies, one mind. That is what you are all about, that is what the goal and endeavour of the Chapter is, believe it or not. And one needs to keep that very strongly in mind, that is what you are striving to do in coming together, to leave yourself behind without ...

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... allow yourself to transcend yourself so that you achieve this mysterious harmony with other people that Bhante talked of as the third order consciousness. He used the Russian *sobornost*, which is this quality of remaining completely yourself at the same time as being completely united with others. Very strange, you are neither one nor two. And where you are as concerned for others as selves as you are for yourself as self. So that is quite a lofty sort of ideal for a Chapter and of course we are a long way from it, we have to do a lot of work to get there.

Well, that is our ideal for the Order as a whole, but the Order as a whole is so big, it is 870 Order members all over the world, how can we really do that? Well, we do it by achieving that with the Order members who we are in regular contact with and especially within our Chapter. We strive to achieve that self transcendence, that third order of consciousness, that *sobornost*, with those we are in direct contact with in our Chapter. And we use the Chapter as a sort of mirror for that harmony. If we can achieve that harmony with everybody in the Chapter then in a way we have got a basis for achieving it with the Order as a whole. In a way you could even say we have achieved it with the Order as a whole, if

everybody was doing that there would be complete harmony within the Order as a whole. And of course it is because of our commitment to the Three Jewels and our commitment to realising that harmony with our friends and brethren, especially within the Chapter, that disharmony within the Chapter is so upsetting. That is why we can be so jarred by disharmony within the Chapter, because we sort of join this thing in order to achieve harmony, that is what we wanted, that was our dream. And when the Chapter doesn't work it can be very upsetting indeed. I know that from my own experience and I have seen it with others. Clearly some of you feel that.

So that is why you have to achieve it. You can't just remain with your feeling of upsetness or disappointment or whatever. What you have to do is work out what you have to do in order to bring about that harmony. And that is generally not going to be in terms of what you make other people do, if you see what I mean, what you have to do is not to get other people to do it, what you have to do is yourself contribute to that harmony by examining what in you is holding back from that harmony, whether it is your unskilful behaviour, whether it is your reactivity, whether it is your lack of skill in communication, or whether it is your simply your fear, your lack of courage, your lack of initiative, or whatever, you have to know quite clearly what it is that you need to do in order to bring greater harmony. And if each and every one of us was clearly aware of what we needed to do to contribute to that harmony then there it surely would begin to come into being. And I think that from what you were all saying this morning it is pretty clear, pretty evident, in broad outline, what each of you needs to do. You just need to be aware of it yourselves and commit yourselves to it, and I think if you then experience some movement, even if there wasn't complete harmony, then that would be very satisfying and you would begin to feel a lot of encouragement in Chapter meetings.

Of course it has to be said that in some strange way there obviously is a harmony amongst you. There does seem to be a certain sort of warmth and mutual goodwill. It is just that there seem to be sort of habits and patterns and so forth. You are not all equally guilty as it were, but you need to each of you find out what it is that you need to do and take responsibility for that. I think it would probably be fairly easy to identify that. And I think quite a lot of effort should be put into identifying clearly at least in broad outline what it is that each of you need to do in order to bring that about. And then of course if you were able to do that and to feel that you were moving towards greater harmony, you were moving towards a gradual self transcendence you would feel satisfied with the experience of the Chapter and you would feel that you were sort of contributing to the harmony of the Order as a whole and you would probably also feel more in harmony with the Order as a whole. So I think that is one of the effects of feeling in harmony with your own Chapter, that you feel in harmony with the Order as a whole. Because it is the focus for the Order as a whole for you.

Of course at the same time I think that you need to be working independently on what Bhante calls realising the unity of the Order. Your Chapter is a very important focus for that, but you also need to be putting effort into the wider experience of the Order through your Regional Order Weekends, through your National Order Weekends, through Conventions, and through reading *Shabda* and contributing to *Shabda*. So you need to be

putting effort in in that way to be in harmony with friends and brethren. And of course on a smaller scale also you need to be having deep communication with and friendship with one or two or three Order members who are close friends.

So again a lot more one could say there but I think the essential point is quite clear, that harmony is of the essence of spiritual life, it is the essence of Sangha, and the Chapter is one of the most important arenas for working on developing harmony and everybody should know what they do that contributes to harmony and what they do that contributes to disharmony, and should be strengthening the former and weakening the latter. And if you don't know then you need to set about finding out and I think you got some good clues this morning. Perhaps you probably need to think much more about it and you will find that has quite far reaching effects.

### **For the Benefit of All Beings**

A further one is in a way the most difficult to say very much about because it is so vast: *we accepted our ordination for the benefit of all beings*. And that means that we continue to live our Order lives for the benefit of all beings. That is what I understand these verses of acceptance to mean, not that we accepted them like that and then forgot about it, but that from then on those four factors were intrinsic to our Order life. And we accepted this ordination for the benefit of all beings. So this means that our lives should contain an altruistic dimension and I think we probably need to be more vividly aware of what that altruistic dimension is. It doesn't mean necessarily helping people with their problems, it doesn't necessarily mean even working in a Centre. Those are both very good ways of doing it, art is for the benefit of others, even if one doesn't think of it like that it is for the benefit of others, and the benefit of others can consist simply in positive interaction with others. But in some way or other that should be a strong aspect of our lives, the altruistic should be a strong aspect of our lives. Otherwise our lives just lived for ourselves and they are therefore not spiritual lives, because the whole purpose of spiritual life is to transcend ourselves as we have already seen, and you I think only transcend yourself when there is a strong altruistic element in your life, when you feel that what you are doing is making a contribution to the world around you. It may be a small contribution and often in a way the small contributions are most important, the grand gestures are often empty ones. But we need to feel that we are contributing. I think often people's dissatisfactions amount to over concern with self and over concern with own interests as it were, not having some sense of contributing to things beyond one. I think this is a feature of modern society that it is increasingly 'me' oriented so people have very few channels for feeling that they are doing something positive for other people. And in our Order and Movement we have a great emphasis on this altruistic aspect, it is intrinsic to our commitment. Your commitment consists in transcending yourself.

So how does this play out in terms of the Chapter? I suppose it plays out in the first place because, as I have already talked of, of the fact that when you come together your Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels is put to the question and it is intensified, your awareness of it is intensified, so that should mean that your Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels as a

Bodhisattva's act should be intensified. So you should become more aware of the extent to which your life is genuinely useful. But perhaps also one should think that the Chapter is an arena within which you can be useful. Within the Chapter you can be trying to benefit other people, the other members of the Chapter in the first place, your concerned not just with yourself but with them, so you are stretching yourself beyond yourself to them. This is quite closely connected of course with harmony. But in a way all of these are very closely connected with each other when you unpack them. So in the first place I think you can think of your Chapter as an arena for practising altruism in a very direct way. When somebody is talking you give your attention and often that is the best thing you can give, rather than advice you give attention, you give interest, you enquire, you show that you really want to know what they are saying, and so on. Sometimes of course you give sympathy and empathy or even *metta*. Sometimes you sort of put your self out for instance by having the courage to ask a question or make a statement which you feel will be helpful. So the spirit of helpfulness should be there within the Chapter.

But I think also the Chapter should have a sense of, and this is a bit more difficult to put into words, but in itself making a contribution to the world. Not that you undertake together some common altruistic project. You might do, that might even be a good exercise, you might decide to just undertake something together, you might undertake to do a class together for instance, or you might undertake to do a little bit of social work, go together and clean an old lady's house or something like that. You might decide that you were going to embody that altruistic dimension by doing something together. That would be a very good thing to do. For instance, just recently when I was in India one Chapter down in Bombay decided that they would clean the pinnacle on the top of the Mahavihara at Bhaja. There is that metal pyramid on the top which is very rusty and spoilt. So the Chapter just decided they would donate their time and energy to go in and clean that pyramid and repainting it. And I thought that was a very positive sort of expression of this idea. But I don't of course mean that that is necessarily what one must do. It might be a way in which the Chapter decided to try to get away from problem orientation and try to experience a common usefulness. But I think it is more a question of a sense that what you are doing in a Chapter is useful to the world, that by being effective in your Chapter you are sort of sending a glow out into the world, that you are reinforcing each other to be more effective for others. And I do very much experience this with our own Chapter here. I suppose it is heightened for me by being International Order Convenor and participating in these sort of meetings. I feel that our Chapter has got to be really good because otherwise I have got nothing to offer the Order as a whole. So in a quite straightforward sense I feel that our Chapter has an altruistic dimension, because we have all got responsibilities for the Order and Movement as a whole. So our Chapter becomes very definitely a sort of focus for altruism in that way. But we are lucky because most of us share very directly a common framework in terms of the College and Council. And even those who are not in the College and Council are very strongly related to it in helping it.

But you are all Order members, you are all part of the same enterprise, and the Chapter should be a refraction of the the thousand armed Avalokitesvara which Bhante has evoked as an image for the Order. But it is a holographic image, it is as if there is not just one thousand armed Avalokitesvara, it is wherever Order members genuinely are together in

the spirit of the Order the whole thousand armed Avalokitesvara is present. So that you could think of the Order not just as one thousand armed Avalokitesvara but one gigantic thousand armed Avalokitesvara which was made up of lots of tiny thousand armed Avalokitesvaras. You sometimes get this in visualisations, you visualise for instance Prajnaparamita as made up of tiny Buddhas. So you could think of the Order as a whole as the thousand armed Avalokitesvara made up of lots of tiny thousand armed Avalokitesvaras which come into existence every time Order members come together in the true spirit of the Order and especially when they come together in their Chapters in the true spirit of the Order. That is the altruistic spirit of the Order, the sense that you are coming together in order to serve the world, to do some good in the world. You are not going to save all sentient beings but you can do your bit to at least lift things up some little bit and through your contact with each other to create an atmosphere, a spirit, that is a real contribution to the world. And in this way you recreate from moment to moment the thousand armed Avalokitesvara in your own persons.

So I hope that that fleshes out, or at least the way in which I at least see what a Chapter is as the focus for the individual's personal spiritual practice, and as the focus for the Order as a whole. And it does so by helping us to be Order members for the sake of enlightenment by intensifying our experience of Going for Refuge, by sharpening our awareness of the ways in which we don't Go for Refuge, and by bringing us to be more intensively aware of what we have to do in order to Go for Refuge, by identifying our working ground much more clearly. And it does this by bringing us into vivid interaction with each other, which is not always pleasant but if we take it in the spirit of Going for Refuge then it will be important and useful as a catalyst for realising what we have got to work on, it will transform us.

And the Order Chapter is a focus for us, the members of the Order, with loyalty to our teachers because within the Chapter there is the chance to experience the spirit of *kalyana mitrata*, both in the sense that we can experience the *kalyana* through other members of the Chapter, because at some time or other every one of them will have it more than we do in one way or another. And because through the Chapter we are in contact with the *kalyana* as it is embodied in the Order through more experienced Order members.

And the Chapter is a focus for us, our participation in the Order, our being Order members, in harmony with friends and brethren because through being in the Chapter we are working to experience harmony, we are working to transcend ourselves, to experience the selflessness, the third order of consciousness, *sobornost*, etc. And even the difficulties that we have are helping us to overcome ourselves so that we can enter into harmony with friends and brethren not just in this situation but within the Order as a whole. So to the extent that we are experiencing that harmony we are experiencing not in one place but in all places.

And then finally the Chapter is the focus for us being member of the Order for the benefit of all beings because through our participation in the Chapter the altruistic dimension of our lives is thrown into focus and through our giving ourselves to each other in a spirit of helpfulness, we are experiencing that altruistic dimension. But more especially through our

participation in the Chapter we are recreating the very spirit of the Order, which is the spirit of the Bodhisattva, the spirit of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. So we are creating a sort of microcosmic thousand armed Avalokitesvara which enables the macrocosmic thousand armed Avalokitesvara to come into being.

And so in this way the Order Chapter is extremely important and a very valuable practice, which perhaps we don't always realise just how far reaching and effective it can be. And perhaps we need an occasion like this to bring it into sharper focus and to take fuller advantage of it.